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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000236

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SUBJECT: HIV/AIDS AND POLITICAL CONTROLS IN ONE OF TIBET'S MOST SENSITIVE REGIONS

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (C) Summary: While optimistic their outreach efforts can have a positive impact, Swiss Red Cross representatives in China's Tibetan prefecture of Shigatse believe that a continued overall lack of education and awareness about HIV/AIDS, the spread of prostitution in the wake of increased numbers of migratory laborers and tourists, and local sexual customs could all facilitate a rapid spread of the disease on the Tibetan Plateau. Official government statistics on HIV/AIDS in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) likely reflect a mere fraction of the extent of the problem. Able since the late 1980's to operate as the only foreign organization with a full-time office in Shigatse, even the Swiss Red Cross has experienced a noticeable tightening in security and political controls during the last year in this highly sensitive border prefecture. Following the unfurling of a banner by four American citizens in late April 2007 at the Everest Base Camp, house-to-house searches for pro-Tibet independence material were conducted in Shigatse. End Summary.

Prostitution and HIV/AIDS

2. (C) During a two-week trip to western Tibet (see septels), CG and Congenoff paid a courtesy call on Swiss Red Cross representatives stationed in Shigatse (strictly protect) and invited them to dinner. Making a point to introduce us to their local Chinese Red Cross counterpart who shares office space with them, the Swiss Red Cross representatives noted their organization was first invited to Shigatse to work on child healthcare-related issues by the 10th Panchen Lama in 1988 just prior to his death. Currently its principal focus is HIV/AIDS prevention. Although other foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have projects in Shigatse, the Swiss Red Cross is the only foreign organization permitted to maintain a full-time office in the prefecture. As the local Red Cross official appeared to listen in on the conversation from behind a partition across the room, the Swiss Red Cross representatives noted they are very happy with the dedication of their local staff and rely on the Chinese Red Cross to iron out any bureaucratic wrinkles they encounter in their work.

3. (C) Later on the way to dinner, which the local Red Cross

official did not wish to attend, the Swiss representatives told us their local counterpart became very "curious" when she learned the office was having foreign visitors and stayed uncharacteristically late to see what the meeting would be about. Giving us a quick tour of the neighborhood surrounding their office, located on a side street just off the main downtown boulevard of the city of Shigatse, the Swiss pointed out that almost the entire area consists of small-scale houses of prostitution. According to metrics used by the Swiss Red Cross, there are currently about 300 such establishments within the city's limits that, although illegal, pretty much all operate without interference from local security authorities. The Swiss Red Cross tries to visit each of the 300 at least once annually to conduct awareness classes on HIV/AIDS and distribute condoms. Almost all hotels and restaurants in Shigatse also make prostitutes available to their clientele, according to the Swiss. (Note: the hotel in which the Lhasa Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) put us up in Shigatse was connected to a rather garish "all night massage parlor." End note).

14. (SBU) The majority of prostitutes in Shigatse -- the second largest city in the TAR after Lhasa with a population of about 80,000 people -- are ethnic Tibetan women, usually at least seventeen-years-of age, who have traveled to the city from the countryside in search of work. According to the Swiss Red Cross representatives, growing numbers of migrant laborers from within and outside the TAR attracted to building projects in Shigatse, as well as the rise in the number of tourists, help account for the increased local growth in prostitution. Extension of the Tibet railroad from Lhasa to Shigatse in 2009 will likely result in an even larger transient population in the prefecture.

15. (C) In addition to prostitution and general ignorance of how HIV/AIDS is transmitted, Tibetan sexual customs also risk facilitating a rapid spread of the disease. A tradition of polyandry is still in evidence in both rural and some urban areas of the TAR and it is not uncommon for women to have more than one husband. With regard to men having sex with men, the subject remains too much of a taboo within Tibetan society to

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allow for meaningful surveys to be conducted or useful data collected. Aware of local political sensitivities on the issue, the Swiss Red Cross does not try to collect infection data in Shigatse. China's official number of 41 total HIV/AIDS cases in the TAR during 2006, however, is "ridiculously low."

Conservative Political Winds

16. (C) Although its long work history in the TAR gives it a measure of protection, even the Swiss Red Cross has experienced a recent noticeable increase in government scrutiny of its activities. Despite having a relatively influential local partner to help shepherd the process, navigating the bureaucratic maze to update its legal registration has not proven easy for the Swiss Red Cross. As has been the case with foreign NGO's operating in Tibetan areas of China, the Swiss Red Cross in Shigatse has been increasingly subjected to frequent demands from local security officials to provide detailed documentation about its ongoing activities. Based on written operational guidelines agreed to with Chinese authorities, the Swiss Red Cross clearly has the right to move freely within and work in any part of Shigatse prefecture. While it has in the past been able to visit border towns, however, during the last year the Swiss Red Cross has found its access to border areas with Nepal impeded.

17. (C) In early 2007, the Swiss Red Cross representatives were themselves briefly detained by Chinese security officers after they had gone for a weekend hike in northern Shigatse. They were quickly released and the Swiss believe the incident was just a mistake committed by overzealous officials unaware of their status. All of the photographs on their cameras, however, were deleted and they were subjected to a lecture on why their

activities should be confined only to Shigatse city unless they obtain prior government approval.

18. (C) The Swiss Red Cross representatives commented that Shigatse, likely due to its sensitive border status and heavy Chinese military presence, is known for the conservatism of its local officials and relative paranoia vis-à-vis foreigners. They also related how, following the unfurling of a banner by four American citizens at the Everest base camp in late April, house-to-house searches were conducted throughout Shigatse for pro-Tibetan independence material. The Swiss expect the current conservative political environment will continue to at least through the Olympic Games next summer.

Economic Conditions

19. (C) According to the Swiss Red Cross representatives, large capital expenditures by the Chinese government have brought economic benefits to both urban and rural ethnic Tibetans in the region. While the hardware of new schools, roads, and other projects are being built, however, far less attention is being paid to the details of such necessary associated issues such as quality standards, maintenance, and, in the case of schools, teacher training and supplies. Shoddy construction is readily apparent throughout Shigatse, as are newly-built but empty office buildings and schools. Job opportunities for ethnic Tibetans are increasing, but many jobs go to newly-arrived Han or Hui Muslim Chinese. The Swiss noted that, perhaps due to local cultural sensitivities over mining on the Tibetan Plateau, Chinese firms in control of gold, copper, and bauxite deposits in Shigatse hire almost exclusively Han or Hui as employees.

Comments

110. (C) Numerous government officials stressed throughout our two-week drive through western Tibet that mining activities are strictly limited and regulated, but local contacts also quietly told us of "informal" mining operations that were quite evident along our route. Its strategic location, resources, and religious significance for Tibetan Buddhism will likely continue to make Shigatse Prefecture a focus of close government control/scrutiny for the foreseeable future. One can only hope that its potential HIV/AIDS problems will also get some attention in Lhasa and Beijing as well.
BOUGHNER